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President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Agenda item 49

Culture of peace

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/62/97 and A/62/337)

The President: The General Assembly will now begin the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, under agenda item 49, entitled "Culture of peace", and in accordance with resolution 61/269, of 25 May 2007.

As members are aware, the High-level Dialogue will discuss the overall theme of interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity.

I welcome all participants to the first High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. By convening this event, the General Assembly has taken an important stand. We are reaffirming the values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But, more important, we are taking concrete steps to promote those values around the world.

During the general debate, heads of State and Government from all regions placed great emphasis on the value of tolerance and mutual understanding. That demonstrates the commitment of the international community to promote those values. I would like in particular to acknowledge the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines for spearheading this initiative, which complements and builds upon other initiatives undertaken by the United Nations, including the Alliance of Civilizations.

We live in unprecedented times. Cultures and religions are being pulled ever closer together by a web of telecommunication and economic links. While contributing to the richness of our human experience, those encounters also reveal deep-rooted misunderstandings. However, in this era of globalization we have the unrivalled opportunity and responsibility to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance.

Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to that endeavour. The United Nations has a crucial role in promoting such a dialogue and advancing the fundamental freedom that we must all respect others' religions and beliefs. In doing so, we should also recognize that a crime committed in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion, and that religion should not be used as a pretext for war.

In that regard, several recommendations emerged from the General Assembly's thematic debate on the

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subject of civilizations and the challenge for peace, which was held earlier this year. Those recommendations stated: that we must acknowledge the legitimate rights of others to assert their identity, if we want to have meaningful dialogue; that religious leaders have a duty, drawing on the principles of their own faiths, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance in their communities; and that there are already many helpful tools available to promote positive encounters among people of different cultures. To that end, we should all become instruments of peace. We must begin a global dialogue using public campaigns and all forms of media to spread greater awareness of the issues.

Governments can play an additional role by adopting educational curricula that instil values of peace and tolerance. Children are not born with prejudice; it is learned. It is our common challenge to eliminate, together, all distorted notions that deepen barriers and widen divides, for they all originate in the discriminatory practices of the mind.

We can achieve this through a multifaceted dialogue that promotes unity in diversity and replaces misunderstanding with mutual understanding and acceptance. The success of this global dialogue also rests on the active involvement of the media, the private sector, civil society, faith groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their insight and outreach will be instrumental in helping to achieve our goal. That is why I am delighted that later this afternoon the General Assembly will hold an interactive hearing with those important stakeholders. All Member States are invited to participate.

Next year we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many people still feel that their rights are not respected. In some regions, many people feel that their dignity has been violated and that internationally agreed principles and values are not equally applied to all. These issues cut to the core of the perceived lack of justice and the political instability in the world today.

To make peace some people believe that you need to forget. From my own experience, I would suggest that reconciliation is a fair compromise between remembering and forgetting. The only means to achieve this is through intensive dialogue at both the political and the cultural and social levels. Promoting human dignity and equal access to rights and opportunities constitutes the cornerstone of this conversation. Here, I would like to quote the great Dante Alighieri:

> "The greatest gift that God in his bounty created, and the most consonant with his goodness, and that which he prizes the most, was free will, with which all intelligent creatures, and they alone, were and are endowed."

In going forward then, let us each respect the uniqueness of each other's perspective so that together we can honour the rich diversity of humanity.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon.

The Secretary-General: I am honoured to be here for this Dialogue. In the nine months that I have been in office, I have travelled to all corners of the united nations, from Kinshasa to Kabul, from Brussels to Beirut. Everywhere I have visited, and among all the different people I have met, I have encountered one common sentiment: a universal longing for peace and an aspiration to prosperity.

But all too often I have discovered that people who aspire to the same things also suffer from the same prejudices. They all fear that which is different from them: the other ethnicity, the other skin colour, the other cultural or linguistic tradition and, above all, the other religion.

And yet, in today's era of global travel and instant satellite transmissions, people everywhere are encountering less of the familiar and more of the other. This reality has fed rising intercultural and interreligious tensions, as well as growing alienation among vast segments of the world population.

Today, there is an urgent need to address this worrying trend. We need to rebuild bridges and engage in a sustained and constructive intercultural dialogue, one that stresses shared values and shared aspirations. It is time to promote the idea that diversity is a virtue, not a threat; it is time to explain that different religions, belief systems and cultural backgrounds are essential to the richness of the human experience; and it is time to stress that our common humanity is greater — far greater — than our outward differences.

In short, it is time — indeed, it is past time — for a constructive and committed dialogue: a dialogue among individuals, among communities and between

nations. The General Assembly is a unique forum for such an exchange. Indeed, by bringing together representatives of all countries under one roof, the Assembly provides a universal platform to reach out to different nations and cultures.

Today's gathering also comes at a particularly auspicious time, as Jews mark the celebration of the Torah and Muslims approach the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Such occasions remind us that men and women of faith around the world can be brought together, rather than separated, by their convictions and their belief in something greater than themselves.

Last week, there was also a ministerial meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations initiative to help build bridges and promote dialogue between cultures and religions. I was delighted to see how membership of the Alliance of Civilizations had nearly doubled since the inaugural meeting a year ago. That reflects the valuable work being performed by the Alliance under the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio. But it also represents a growing resolve among nations to work together to heal divides in our world.

I draw strength from that resolve at a time when so many of the challenges we face are aggravated by distrust and hostility. I also draw strength from gatherings such as this one. Looking around this Hall today, I feel that we are all united: we are united in our choice of dialogue before confrontation; united in our pursuit of engagement before alienation; united in our embrace of harmony and understanding.

In that spirit, I wish all participants a most productive meeting and look forward to the outcome of their discussions.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

Before proceeding further I would now like to draw attention to a number of organizational matters pertaining to the conduct of the meeting.

We turn first to the length of statements. In order to accommodate all the speakers on the list, I urge speakers to adhere to the seven-minute time limit for their statements, on the understanding that that does not preclude the distribution of more extensive written texts. I earnestly appeal to speakers to cooperate in this respect, so that all speakers can speak today and tomorrow.

In order to assist speakers in managing their time, a light system has been installed at the rostrum, which functions as follows: a green light will be activated at the start of a speaker's statement; an orange light will be activated 30 seconds before the end of the seven minutes; and a red light will be activated when the seven-minute limit has elapsed.

Before giving the floor to the first speaker, I would like to note that I have been informed by the delegation of Israel that, due to the Jewish holidays of Shmini Atzeret/Simhat Torah and the last days of Sukkot, which are being celebrated on 4 and 5 October, Israel regrets its inability to participate in the High-Level Dialogue and looks forward to joining future interreligious and intercultural events.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Manuel de Castro, Vice-President of the Republic of the Philippines.

Mr. De Castro (Philippines): It is a great honour for me to represent my country at the High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. As this is the first time that I address the General Assembly, allow me, Mr. President, to convey to you my warmest congratulations on your well-deserved election. May I also convey my congratulations to the Secretary-General in his maiden year at the helm of the United Nations system.

The promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation has become a cornerstone of Philippine policy for peace and development. It is not a new concept for us, given that our history has been largely shaped by cultural and religious diversity. Thus, the highest law of our land — the Philippine constitution — mandates the promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of all Filipinos, in particular those of religious minorities and indigenous communities.

As early as the 1960s, religious and grass-roots organizations and other civil society groups — particularly in Muslim Mindanao, in the southern Philippines — had already been engaged in the practice of interreligious and intercultural dialogue as an effective tool for peace. The national Government therefore saw fit to enact laws and adopt measures to strengthen and enhance the engagement of civil society in promoting economic and human development and the peace process.

The 2004-2010 medium-term Philippine development plan, which is the framework for governance of the present Administration, values interfaith dialogue, education and advocacy as effective tools for the conduct of healing and reconciliation programmes in conflict-affected communities. The 2006-2010 Philippine plan of action on interfaith dialogue and cooperation strengthens Government and civil society partnership and capacities in promoting interfaith dialogue and solidarity, in particular in the areas of education and training, media advocacy, peace processes, poverty reduction, the promotion of human rights, environmental protection, the empowerment of women and anti-corruption efforts.

In June of this year, our President created the National Committee on Interfaith Cooperation to strengthen the implementation of our Government's interfaith policy. Basic madrasa education has now been institutionalized in all public elementary schools that have Muslim students. Moreover, a number of our universities are developing and incorporating peace studies into their school curricula. Our Congress has also passed the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, which is recognized to be among the world's strongest State-promulgated laws that respect and protect the fundamental freedoms and ways of life of indigenous peoples. Key development policies are thus in place in the Philippines to provide an environment conducive to the development of a vibrant culture of peaceful interfaith communities, which has made it possible for civil society groups to participate in development efforts at the national, local and community levels.

The Philippine experience has demonstrated the significance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue in preventing conflicts and healing social wounds in conflict-stricken communities such as those in the southern Philippines. Interfaith dialogue has been found to be essential in translating shared values of peace and respect into practical action at the grass-roots level. It offers a way out of the vicious circle of mistrust and conflict among religious and ethnic groups, for two reasons.

First, it provides a venue for building trust and respect based on appreciation and acceptance of the common values and differences among religions, cultures and ethnicities. Secondly, it provides an opportunity to establish a common understanding of the causes of armed conflicts affecting multi-ethnic and multicultural communities such as those in the southern Philippines. That approach complements our Government's efforts in resolving conflicts through its comprehensive peace process, in which religious leaders and workers and various faith-based and interfaith organizations are involved in peace negotiations, the monitoring of ceasefire agreements and advocating for human rights and international humanitarian law.

Our very own Bishops-Ulama Conference, which is recognized as the first of its kind in the world, continues to be a partner of Government in pursuing the national peace agenda. That organization and many other interfaith groups form part of the civil society network whose strength and support significantly define the outcome of the peace process. Along with the business community, those groups are converging in building a dedicated peace constituency, in particular by carving out zones of peace that bar armed conflict within delineated territories.

Inspired by our achievements in promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation at home, in 2004 the Philippines introduced an unprecedented General Assembly draft resolution on the promotion of interreligious cooperation for peace. Adopted as resolution 59/23, it inspired the convening of the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which led to the holding of the 2005 summit, which was chaired by our President and which adopted the Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace.

As an offshoot of the Conference, in March 2006 the Philippines launched the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which is a platform for collaboration supportive of the peace and development goals of the United Nations. The Tripartite Forum has much to offer. I invite all Governments that have not yet done so to join us in the Tripartite Forum.

The Philippines has also been active in promoting interfaith dialogue at the regional level — promoting interfaith dialogue at the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, the Asia-Europe Meeting, the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Forum — all of which have espoused that concept. Last year, the Philippines hosted the Cebu Dialogue on Regional Interfaith

Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity.

This year, the Philippines co-sponsored the third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, which was held in New Zealand, where over 150 participants from Asian and Pacific nations resolved to build bridges among faith communities and Governments to learn from each other's experiences and promote peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

Last June, the Philippines co-sponsored the third Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue, which was held in Nanjing, China, where 160 participating countries vowed to deepen both government and civil society participation in the promotion and observance of interfaith dialogue for peace and development. The fourteenth summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana in 2006 endorsed the offer of the Philippines to host a NAM special meeting on interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace in the Philippines in 2009, which will include the participation of non-governmental organizations and the religious sector.

Indeed, the present global, regional and national peace and security situation highlights the need for deliberate, strategic and coordinated efforts in interfaith dialogue and cooperation through strengthened partnership between governments, the United Nations system and civil society. In that regard, my delegation proposes the following ways forward. First, United Nations Member States would institutionalize interfaith and interreligious initiatives through policy and appropriate implementing mechanisms; in that regard, the Philippines puts forward as a model the Philippine national committee on interfaith cooperation. Secondly, Member States would uphold freedom of religion and strengthen their respective mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights. Thirdly, Member States would adopt a common plan of action and declare an international year of dialogue among religions and cultures. Fourthly, Member States would adopt policies and programmes to promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples and would implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Fifthly, Member States would encourage interfaith centres in schools of higher learning. Sixthly, the United Nations would strengthen the newly established focal unit on interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational matters to ensure that global, regional and national efforts towards promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace are monitored, reported, sustained and supported.

The Philippines has played and will continue to play an active role in the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace, development and the protection of human dignity. We are committed to the urgent task of deepening cooperation and understanding between cultures, religions and civilizations to eliminate racial tensions, myths and prejudices that exacerbate conflicts and to effectively deal with global problems and issues.

I would like to close with an appeal to everyone present here today. Let us commit ourselves to work for United Nations system-wide interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation as an important means to pursue, build and sustain a culture of peace and let us remain aware of the positive contributions of faith communities in the discharge of the respective mandates of the United Nations.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Munir Akram, chairman of the delegation of Pakistan.

Mr. Akram (Pakistan): This is a moment of immense pleasure for me to be able to participate in the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. The event is being organized as a follow-up to General Assembly resolution 61/221, which was jointly sponsored by Pakistan and the Philippines. It is also the first high-level dialogue on the important issue of interfaith cooperation that has emerged as one of the greatest issues which faces the international community.

The history of the last two millenniums proves that all the major monotheistic religions of the world — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — share a common heritage and converge on a multiplicity of universal values. The basic tenets of all religions and cultures are fundamentally similar: prescribing indivisible peace, dignity, honesty, equality, harmony, tolerance, cooperation, commitment, patience and fortitude. Throughout history, confrontation between faiths and civilizations, when it has occurred, was motivated by competing political or economic interests rather than incompatibility between the fundamental precepts of any religion.

Today also, the manifestations of misunderstanding and friction between cultures and civilizations are not the result of religious differences. They arise from divergent political perspectives on certain important issues such as the crises in the Middle East.

The post-9/11 world has accentuated that polarization amongst communities belonging to different faiths and religions. There are perceptions in the West about Islam, which is portrayed by some as a faith propagating terrorism and extremism and bent upon striking at the values of the Western world. The image of Islam is further distorted by the role of some religious and political extremists on both sides.

In the Muslim world, there is a general belief that the West is deliberately suppressing or allowing the suppression of Muslim peoples in Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir and elsewhere. And it is felt at the popular level that freedom of expression is exploited as a weapon for the propagation and projection of insults and hate against Islam and its sacred symbols and personalities.

Islam is not a threat to Western civilization. It is a religion of peace and submission. There have been numerous instances throughout history where Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together peacefully as citizens in one State. Today Muslims should also be able to live in fraternity and freedom in Western countries. As the British historian Karen Armstrong has stated, if we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another.

It is Pakistan's hope that the Alliance of Civilizations launched under the auspices of the United Nations, can provide the organizational framework for the adoption of a comprehensive strategy for action at the international and national levels to promote understanding and cooperation between religions and cultures. Such a strategy should be inclusive involving Governments, civil society, religious leaders, the private sector, media and international organizations.

At the national level, each country should promote conscious action to counter extremism within its society. We must prohibit extremist organizations and hate literature, prevent the misuse of places of worship for the promotion of extremist views, prohibit the defamation and denigration of religions and religious personalities under the pretext of freedom of expression, adopt appropriate reforms in educational curricula to promote the correct interpretation of various faiths and cultures, initiate dialogue among our own people to build further understanding of the true spirit and values of their own faith as well as the major religions and adopt conscious policies for the protection of religious minorities.

At the international level, a series of actions are required, such as sincere efforts to resolve major international disputes, especially where these involve friction between different religions and faiths; the promotion of equitable socio-economic development and an end to the exploitation of the natural resources of developing countries; and the promotion of universal and multicultural education, inculcating greater understanding of other religions and cultures. To this end, one specific step we could take is the establishment of a common school for the training of officials and diplomats from nations representing different faiths. Additionally, we could encourage greater intercivilizational and interreligious exchanges and communication among Member States, including through the proper use of the Internet and other modern information technologies. Finally, in certain societies where migration has created a sudden mixture of faiths and cultures, we could launch conscious processes for gradual and peaceful integration, coexistence and cooperation. A start could be made in this direction with adoption of confidence-building measures that can overcome the hate and negative stereotypes that have sometimes been allowed to arise.

It is not surprising that there are differences within and between societies, cultures, civilizations and religions. These differences and diversity should not be the cause of confrontation. On the contrary, as the Holy Quran says, "this ethnic diversity is only for the sake of identity".

Each one of us is a member of the same human family, with the same hopes and aspirations for a happy and positive life. Each human being must have the right and the opportunity to realize these hopes and aspirations in accordance with his or her own values and beliefs, without coercion or intervention. For, as the Holy Quran also says, and we in Islam believe, "a man's faith is only between himself and God Almighty".

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Fiorenzo Stolfi, Head of Government and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of San Marino.

Mr. Fiorenzo Stolfi (San Marino) (*spoke in Italian; English text provided by the delegation*): Let me start by expressing my most sincere appreciation for this high-level meeting, which, together with the initiatives of numerous United Nations agencies on the topic of cultural diversity and projects, such as the Alliance of Civilizations, highlight the urgent need to promote, within our societies, the strengthening of dialogue among cultures and religions and therefore, the need for a commitment on the part of competent institutions and civil society to that dialogue.

This commitment to the strengthening of dialogue is, indeed, the sine qua non required for overcoming division and mistrust and for building confidence and strengthening cooperation within States and among peoples, which will, in turn, lead to the achieving of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

The Republic of San Marino, which maintained the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as the main priority of the programme during its six-month chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, ending last May, organized a conference on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, with the representation of diplomatic and religious representatives, researchers, and representatives of associations and the media from all over Europe. On this occasion, the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General underlined the current and urgent need to rebuild bridges and to be involved in a constant and constructive intercultural dialogue that promotes common values and shared aspirations.

Indeed, the role that people of faith can play seems to be fundamental in that they represent the underlying belief and ideal which belong to all great religious traditions: compassion, solidarity, respect for life and love for others, while calling on their believers to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated.

Additionally, on this occasion, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was also presented. This document will be published by the Council of Europe in 2008 — the very year the European Union has dedicated to intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the Council of Europe entrusted San Marino with the coordination of the first annual meeting dedicated to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue to be held, on an experimental basis, in spring 2008 and with the participation of the representatives of the 47 member States, as well as representatives of religions and civil societies.

On the basis of this experience, my country deems it clearly useful for international organizations, in addition to States, to multiply these occasions of meeting and dialogue, which, first of all, strengthen their mutual cooperation to face the challenges and new opportunities of cultural and religious diversity, and, secondly, provide them with new ideas, while lending momentum to the activities to be carried out by each of them.

However, dialogue cannot be separated from respect. Cultures and religions, both in terms of their expressions and mutual relationships, must respect those common values representing the very foundations of coexistence within the international community and cooperation among peoples. That is, respect for human rights — which are universal, unalienable and indivisible — democratic rule, the rule of law and the principle of justice.

Therefore, I share the assessments, concerns and aspirations of the representatives of the countries and Governments present here today. I note the complexity of the issues that increasingly characterizes our national realities, involved as we all are in the process of globalization, and leads to claims and problems that often call for novel and urgent answers. We believe dialogue can decisively help us overcome fears, the rejection of others and the emergence of cultural or religious discrimination, radicalism and violence. It can help us respect the integrity of the individual and, therefore, their practice of a faith or set of cultural values; a practice which, of course, must be a conscious and free choice.

Indeed, through dialogue, we can effectively strengthen our civil and social contracts by promoting the message of peace and dignity shared by various religious identities while rejecting, at the same time, distorted uses of religion.

At the national level, the participation and periodic campaigns of specific issues promoted by international organizations, as well as the attention paid to particular themes, such as those promoted by the United Nations, can serve as the engine for an

activity that originates in our national reality and can then spread in a incisive manner, involving different groups, in particular youth, who remain the main target of our action.

In conclusion, I would like to share a good wish with all participants of this meeting. A small cave has been carved into the stone of Mount Titano, where the small and millenary Republic of San Marino is situated. This space is devoted to meditation and prayer and open to all, regardless of their ideological or religious beliefs. It provides a haven for meditation and peace, which have for centuries been the fundamental values of my country and the priority goal of its participation in international affairs.

However, even this small, rocky cave reflects the light of the immense, universal message emanating from this Assembly, from which I take inspiration to wholeheartedly express the wish that, with the support of international cooperation and moments of significance such as this, the international community can overcome the barrier of hostility in hearts and minds and allow space for open-mindedness, meeting and dialogue where the constructive purposes characterizing all our peoples can be pooled together to build a future of peace for all of humanity.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Vartan Oskanian, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Armenia.

Mr. Oskanian (Armenia): An ancient people, serving as the perennial buffer between empires on the most trampled path on earth, Armenians have become living witnesses to the benefits of dialogue between and within cultures. We have been engaged in that international exchange for a very long time. Today, we in Armenia are among the greatest promoters of dialogue, especially in our immediate region.

Our geography has compelled us to seek bridges with peoples and cultures different from our own. If we have an independent State today, it is because we succeeded in perpetuating our identity even as we interacted and exchanged with societies around us.

It is because of our experience that we feel compelled to continually search for non-traditional ways to approach the overarching issue of our time: living at peace in a pluralist society. Not only have we lived in a pluralist society, we have, because of genocide and dispersion, had to set up homes and shops in nearly every country on Earth. This began when Armenian genocide survivors were welcomed and happily integrated into the fabric of the Arab Middle East. Religious differences did not preclude inclusion. Our diaspora, living as it did across borders, became both the means and the beneficiary of international exchange and dialogue.

We are living witnesses then to the fact that religious and linguistic differences need not translate to enmity and exclusion. It is intolerance, from its simplest form to its most complex, and the consequent rejection of individuals' human dignity, that causes ruptures in and between societies. To build a peace atop pain and destruction, it is clear that solutions can only be found through the genuine and universal acceptance and application of basic and fundamental human rights, both individual and collective.

Those rights include the right to determine one's destiny, to live free of security and oppression. The struggle of our brothers and sisters in Nagorno Karabagh is exactly that: a struggle for the most basic human right — the right to live free. It is not a struggle against anyone's religion or culture. The effort to seek support against their struggle by relying on ethnic and religious solidarity belies the universality of their claim, that people everywhere, whether Armenians from Nagorno Karabagh or Palestinians or the people of Darfur, all deserve to live in freedom and dignity.

As societies which have experienced pain and suffering at the hands of oppressors, we must teach and rely on the moral, ethical, social and political benefits of tolerance and cooperation. We must not feed the fears of otherness and exclusion. The frustrations, resentments and hostilities of victims of xenophobia and racism should not be underestimated or dismissed. The security implications of pent-up anger, daily humiliation and hopelessness cannot be exaggerated. We must all be concerned by them for reasons of principle as well as enlightened self-interest.

Our objective is a country and a world where the rights of individuals and groups are respected, where each neighbourhood and community, each city and country and each region and continent are safe havens for all who live or travel there. Religion is used to tear people apart, as are economic disparities, language and ideology. But the frustrating and fascinating contradiction is that faith and humanity also bind people together.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, The Honourable Adviser for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh.

Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh): Mr. President, may I begin by applauding your stewardship of the General Assembly and your leadership regarding the topic we are dealing with today. I also applaud the enthusiasm of the Secretary-General in this respect and his stimulating introductory remarks. I congratulate Pakistan and the Philippines for their initiative, to which Bangladesh accords unswerving support.

The present age of globalization poses a myriad of challenges. At the same time it opens up opportunities for the promotion of cultural diversity. Interactions among States and other actors have substantially increased over the past decade. They have also enhanced the scope for cooperation, complementarities and fulfilment of mutual interests. They have increased the potential for both cohesion and clash. Sadly, mistrust, suspicion, prejudice and misperception of the "other" continue to persist. Various new manifestations of intolerance towards vulnerable groups, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, refugees and migrant workers are on the rise.

We have witnessed the proliferation of extremism and racism. Millions have been rendered victims of religious and ethnic profiling or cultural intolerance. This situation has further been exploited by certain groups in order to widen the gap between various religions and faiths. Religious and cultural intolerance and disrespect are based on a false notion of supremacy of one religion or culture over others. This attitude fosters hatred, mistrust and exclusion. Eventually it leads to social, economic and political disparities and polarization in society.

We are convinced that people can overcome hatred through proper education that inculcates a culture of peace. Education is also essential for spreading better understanding and harmony. The State has a responsibility for removing hatred and intolerance and for protecting the citizens from discrimination. Building institutions, enacting appropriate laws and cultivating mutual respect can help establish a society of religious and communal harmony. The civil society along with the Government can and indeed must play a very crucial role towards this end. The media can also make a significant contribution towards raising awareness against such discrimination and intolerance and can bring to the fore the fact that humanity transcends all.

Peace is not simply the absence of war. Neither is it only the absence of violence and insecurity. Sustained peace is accompanied and must be accompanied by progress and development, by which we mean poverty eradication, rule of law, adherence to democratic principles and pluralism, dissemination of proper education, empowerment of women and the like.

Bangladesh believes in this context that international cooperation is a precondition for the pursuit of global peace, security and development. We stress that such international cooperation must be based on social inclusion, equality and equity, human dignity and justice. It is, therefore, necessary to promote better understanding among various religions, beliefs and cultures. It is also desirable to spread the message of universal respect for cultures and religions by all and for all. The United Nations can play a catalytic role in that noble endeavour.

The challenge before us is to transform the diversity of cultures, religions, traditions and customs into a unifying force. That force can contain the proliferation of ethnic, religious and civil conflicts. It can also eliminate the existing sense of insecurity and fear. In the final analysis, it can contribute to the global transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace. Indeed, each year Bangladesh submits to the General Assembly a draft resolution on a culture of peace, which gains the overwhelming support of member States. We shall do the same during the current session, and we look forward to the same level of support.

Bangladesh has always played an important role in the maintenance of international peace and security. Our commitment to United Nations peacekeeping as a major troop-contributing country remains unwavering. With the growing mandate of peacekeeping operations, peacebuilding responsibilities — which include many of the subjects we are talking about today — now play important role in post-conflict situations. We believe that the promotion of tolerance and cultural diversity can substantially reduce conflict and crime. We also underscore the importance of inclusion of the culture of peace in the operational activities of the Peacebuilding Commission. In our own country, Bangladesh, followers of different faiths live in a state

of tranquil harmony, as we have managed to inculcate in our people a sense of tolerance and respect for diversity.

The great religions and faiths of the world profess and promote the same values. These relate to the sanctity of human life, peace, justice and tolerance. Is that too tall an order or too high an aim for humanity to conform to? I do not think so. Earlier today when you spoke, Sir, you quoted from Dante Alighieri, that great Italian writer of the Renaissance. Another great poet said, and said very aptly that man's reach should exceed his grasp, for what else are the heavens for?

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency The Honourable S. K. Boafo, Minister for Chieftaincy and Culture of Ghana.

Mr. Boafo (Ghana): It is a privilege for me to participate in this very important meeting to engage in dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. In view of globalization, every nation should strive for peaceful coexistence with every other. The importance of dialogue on issues that can create peace cannot be underestimated.

Modern pluralistic societies, if they wish to ensure peace and preserve the well-being of their citizens, cannot afford to pay the price of cultural and religious monologue or cultural and religious fundamentalism. In this technological era, when distances between continents have become insignificant and when the populations of many countries have acquired a multinational and multi-ethnic character, the development of a democratic society is impossible without enabling each citizen to integrate his or her values and principles with the values of other cultural and religious groups.

Certain values and principles are universally shaped and cut across all civilizations, be they Western, European, Asian or African, in establishing a sense of human community. They propound basic truths and standards of behaviour that constitute the very basis of social cohesion and collective efforts. Any dialogue must therefore focus on the importance of shared values which give meaning to life and provide form and substance to identities. It must also foster respect for the other and acknowledge and uphold diversity.

In situations of major social and economic transformation, often induced by the consequences of globalization, the constant promotion and renewed awareness of ethical principles and human rights are of key importance. I am therefore happy to inform the Assembly that the 1992 constitution of Ghana recognized the key issue of human rights which is manifested in its preamble.

Intercultural and interreligious contacts and exchanges open new opportunities for societies to better understand others and themselves. Such interaction is therefore an integral feature of and precondition for social progress and peacebuilding. This High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is an opportune forum for all of us, especially in this era, when the world is embroiled in inter-ethnic, intercultural and interreligious conflicts. It is expected that this Dialogue will assist countries that have such challenges to find lasting solutions and deepen their understanding in that respect.

Having expressed my country's support for this Dialogue, I wish to share a few experiences from Ghana which have created a sense of peaceful coexistence and harmony among our varied cultures and religions. That has been achieved through the promotion of respect for values and attitudes and policies based on mutual respect, understanding and non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, faith or other cultural characteristics.

Our diverse culture has its roots in our institution of chieftaincy, which plays a vital function in peacebuilding and partnering with Government to create peace within our communities. Our chiefs extend compassion to everyone, irrespective of faith, culture or origin. Our traditional values are also geared towards sustaining and protecting the environment, which sometimes involves issues that create recipes for conflicts.

In Ghana, all the religious institutions team up with the Government to create a peaceful environment for our people. The communication machinery, be it governmental or private, allows different faiths and cultures to utilize its facilities without any hindrance.

Despite the different cultures existing in Ghana, there is always unity in diversity in everything that our people do. Therefore, Government has little to grapple with in the area of conflicts among the cultures and religions that are a common denominator in our lives. Culture and religion have blended so well that it is

difficult to identify the lines of division. For instance, traditional music, drumming and dancing are common practices in our churches, which are mostly of the Western tradition. It behoves all countries, in particular those that have interreligious and intercultural challenges, to learn from other countries and regions that have successfully managed religions among cultures and regions.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Tarek Mitri, Minister of Culture and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of Lebanon.

Mr. Mitri (Lebanon) (*spoke in Arabic*): First, I wish to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of your new and responsible task. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Secretary-General and to your predecessor, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa. My thanks go also to the delegations of the Philippines and Pakistan for all of the efforts they have made.

Interest in this subject is increasing due to repeated initiatives on the subject, and because of the difficulties that arise in relations among nations and the dangers and fears caused by ignorance in the face of policies that manipulate religious symbols, emotions and cultural characteristics in the fight for power. Because of their extremism, such policies force us to assert our identity and individualism and to feel hostility towards others, whether they be near or far away.

The international community's interest in dialogue has intensified as a result of concern about new and renewed phenomena characterized by religious and ethnic violence, terrorism, intimidation and disinformation intended to slander and humiliate others. Efforts have been made to improve understanding, but such efforts should not be the province of our elites; rather, they should be the work of society as a whole. This problem must be addressed urgently, not just over the long term.

Over the past two decades, against a background of tension and confrontation, attempts have been made to address fanaticism and extremism and to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. The increased demand for dialogue among intellectuals and adherents of various religions encourages us to wonder whether its promises are realistic. We must promote such initiatives on the basis of two perspectives: credibility and effectiveness. Credibility means not only good intentions, but also the capacity to be serious and to be respected by the broadest majority of people. Obviously, effectiveness does not mean immediate change; rather, it means tangible effects on mindsets, feelings and attitudes and, indirectly, on the development of relationships and events.

We must also be more specific in defining the goals of dialogue so that we can highlight its value and agree on its rules. Dialogue, like culture and religion, has many meanings. That is why it lends itself to a multitude of uncoordinated and sometimes divergent efforts. Lebanon has been dealing with this issue, because we have made dialogue part of our national consciousness. Our country's message is that we attach great importance to dialogue, although we have not always succeeded in building the confidence of Lebanese citizens in dialogue's capacity to strengthen citizenship, equality, respect for diversity and coexistence, to which our constitution refers several times.

At this time of religious and political division and tensions — whatever the reasons behind them may be — we are facing challenges as a result of the dialogue of life. Those challenges pose difficulties for us in our attempts to preserve our unity and diversity. Ensuring unity in the areas of culture and politics can threaten the richness of our diversity and our ability to benefit from that richness. Sometimes we fear that diversity threatens our national identity and allegiance; such fear leads to alienation. Thus, we must always choose the potential offered by dialogue, which is sometimes lacking in situations of confrontation.

Dialogue is not a search for agreement at any cost; it requires that we accept and embrace difference and that we put it in its proper context, rather than either minimizing or exaggerating it. Dialogue does not eliminate rivalry or confrontation, but proposes a way to organize those elements without succumbing to an endless negotiating process. Negotiation is limited by power relationships, while dialogue helps to liberate us from them and to change and sometimes even restructure them by putting the parties on an equal footing. Dialogue opens the door that we close when people are reduced to a single category, mould and identity, whereas identities are in fact interlocked and diverse.

In Lebanon and other countries, the idea has arisen that religious and cultural groups have harmonious personalities and unique characteristics. Individuals have an idealized image of their own communities in comparison with those of others. Thus, the differences of others are seen as flaws and defects. The essence of the group is personified in the individual. That justifies reduced accountability when reprehensible acts are committed by those who belong to the same religious community or nationality, even if they live far away. Thus, violence — whether real or symbolic — spreads. Distant conflicts can thus affect relationships between neighbours. Several countries, including my own, face that danger, which serves the political purposes of foreign interference and runs counter to the common interest of the national community. Our experience has shown us that dialogue is credible and effective and that it can promote the autonomy of individuals, particularly at difficult times of ideological mobilization. Dialogue enables us to move away from intimidation and provides an alternative path of differing points of view. Dialogue enables us to put out the fires ignited by various conflicts.

The United Nations and its agencies have embarked on various initiatives and programmes that the General Assembly adopted last year. We are seeking to expand the number of participants in these exchanges of views and to encourage dialogue and understanding. But we must not stop there. Dialogue is a language, a culture and a paradigm for communications; it is not limited to intellectuals or religious dignitaries. Dialogue involves us all, particularly the media and politicians. Their statements, news stories and images often emphasize sensationalism and generalizations rather than providing explanations and details.

For many people, particularly those living in diverse societies, genuine and effective dialogue remains the alternative to clashes of ignorance, which draw borders of blood between religions, cultures, countries and regions. The United Nations has understood what is at stake; we are all confronting this renewed challenge with respect to religious, moral and cultural values. We must recall that when we choose dialogue and its culture, we respect the Charter of the United Nations.

I should like to close by noting that Lebanon's close relationship with the United Nations ensures that the Organization will not forget our country and will focus on Lebanon's defence of its freedom, independence and stability. Thus, Lebanon can remain faithful to its role as a witness to the richness and vitality of this dialogue among various religions and cultures.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Nitya Pibulsonggram, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Thailand.

Mr. Pibulsonggram (Thailand): Sixty-two years ago, our predecessors, inspired by a shared aspiration to save succeeding generations from the scourge of conflict, created this institution, the United Nations, on the basis of a common faith: faith in the ability of humanity to resolve its differences peacefully. That faith is based fundamentally on the following belief: that differences, whether in ideas or in values, in political systems or in cultural heritage, are not barriers to cooperation; and that differences need not be feared, but rather should be celebrated, as they reflect the rich diversity of humanity, of civilization and of history. Our United Nations was founded to promote respect for this diversity among nations, to promote cooperation between countries, despite differences, for the betterment of humanity as a whole.

Today, this Organization — indeed, this generation — faces a great challenge, one posed by a rising culture of intolerance and extremism, of disrespect and violence. For some, this is being perceived as no less than an impending clash among civilizations. But whatever it is called, this phenomenon is the very antithesis of what the United Nations stands for, because it challenges the very notion of respect for the diversity of humanity. We cannot let this come to pass.

There are many causes for this rising intolerance and lessening of mutual respect, ranging from a perceived sense of injustice to misunderstandings or miscommunication. Many times this intolerance, this violence, is propagated by the few to misguide the many in order to bring harm to them, or harm to all. For some, it involves portraying a problem as a religious conflict where in fact there is none. Indeed, this is what some are trying to do in my own country, Thailand, and they have failed utterly. No one believes them.

Such intolerance, whatever the cause may be, if not addressed, will likely exacerbate misunderstanding.

This could lead to distrust, to disagreement and, of course, to dispute. We cannot let this happen.

For all these reasons and more, the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is as timely as it is necessary. Here, I wish to commend the Philippines and Pakistan for their pivotal role in helping to realize this important meeting, because now is the time. It is the time for the moderate majority, for those who believe in tolerance and respect for diversity, to speak out and take action.

The question before us is: what is the best way to achieve this? How do we move from noble ideas to concrete action? How do we feasibly promote greater respect for cultural diversity and tolerance in our societies and between societies? How do we inculcate a culture of peace in our countries and around the world?

We ourselves will have to take the first step, within our own countries and within our respective regions. In the Kingdom of Thailand, our new Constitution continues to protect and to promote religious freedoms, with our Monarch serving as Defender of all Faiths. Interfaith dialogue is organized by local religious leaders to address common problems shared by people of various faiths in the same community — problems such as environmental degradation, for example.

In our region of South-East Asia we have countries that are predominantly Muslim, Christian and Buddhist, all working together to building an Association of Southeast Asian Nations community where diversity is considered to be a source of strength. Each nation, each region, will identify its own best means to promote tolerance and respect for diversity, in a manner that reaches out to the grass roots. This is not something that can be imposed from without, least of all by the United Nations; but it is something that can be encouraged, because tolerance and respect for diversity are universal values, beneficial to all, detrimental to none — save for those who stand to lose, such as extremists.

The second step is to identify critical target groups to determine the critical instruments that can help accelerate the momentum of support for a culture of peace and tolerance. Here, I believe the key target group is youth, and the key instrument is education — an education that inculcates tolerance and respect for the values of other cultures and faiths, a curriculum that promotes understanding of different cultures while promoting pride in one's own, and also an exchange programme that enables youths to be exposed to peoples of different cultures and beliefs, whether in their own countries or beyond.

We have tried using these tools in our own country. A new course on all the religions in Thailand is being designed, with a view to enhancing tolerance in our pluralistic society. Exchange programmes to bring our youths of one religion to live in communities belonging to another religion, as well as in other countries, are being implemented.

The third step is to coordinate and consolidate our various efforts at the global level to promote respect for diversity and tolerance. There are many important initiatives in this regard, and they all have great added value. But we can always seek to avoid duplication of efforts.

General Assembly resolution 61/221 on this issue, which Thailand co-sponsored, requests the Secretary-General to ensure the systematic and organizational follow-up on all such initiatives within the United Nations framework. In his report dated 25 September 2007 (A/62/337), the Secretary-General has taken an important first step by compiling activities undertaken under these initiatives, including the important contributions by UNESCO. Perhaps further efforts would also include interfacing with similar initiatives outside the United Nations, including regional and interregional initiatives.

No peace among humankind can long endure if cultural and civilizational fault lines are allowed to form and to deepen. No progress for humanity can be sustained for long if trust and tolerance are overshadowed by misunderstanding and hatred, because the threat of religious intolerance, the danger of intercultural conflict, can emanate from not only between civilizations and countries but also from within nations and societies. Such intolerance, such conflict, whether between countries or within nations, are unacceptable.

It is thus up to us, women and men of goodwill, to see to it that a culture of peace and a culture of tolerance prevail and flourish. It is up to us, the Member States of the United Nations, to see to it that a core value of this Organization — respect for diversity — is nurtured and sustained. For only through goodwill among nations, understanding among peoples

and concerted action among Member States, all based on mutual respect, can we be assured that the challenge posed by intolerance and extremism will be surmounted.

In this important task, we cannot afford to fail.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Sven Alkalaj, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mr. Alkalaj (Bosnia and Herzegovina): It is my great pleasure and honour to be here with you today and I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the President of the United Nations General Assembly and the Governments of the Philippines and Pakistan for convening this meeting on such an important topic.

Dialogue, respect and coexistence are the three keys words for a better world and a sustainable future, where reconciliation will lead to the termination of conflict and overcoming the "us vs. them" mentality, leading us into a world of tolerance, peace and true prosperity. From the whole range of cultures and peoples around the world and the whole range of religions and attitudes found on our planet to the extraordinary multiplicity of the natural world, we depend on diversity.

Diversity is the real spice of our lives and has become a factor much sought after and, at the same time, much feared. Recognizing of our common destiny as human beings can help us overcome the "us vs. them" mentality. Unity and diversity must be our common goal.

But how do we reach this goal? The United Nations has provided an excellent forum for the exchange of views on how to attain this goal. Through the constant activity of its main bodies and many initiatives, the United Nations provides guidelines and additional impetus to Member States, encouraging them to pursue, in their activities and efforts, the promotion of tolerance and understanding, as well as universal respect for religious and cultural diversity.

Dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions has great potential for aiding conflict prevention on the international, national and local levels by reducing misunderstanding and mistrust and by laying the foundations for the non-violent resolution of conflict. It also has enormous potential for solving current and future political, social and economic problems by encouraging people to share their experiences, knowledge, trust and all the beautiful expressions and content of the real spice of our life, namely, diversity.

The need for dialogue between cultures and religions has become a fact of life. Respect for all things that are different from ourselves and from our own system of values can help in understanding these things as well as other people's visions of the future, their core beliefs and the content of their lives. The values and viewpoints of one's own civilization, culture, religion and system must not be taken as absolute and universal. Only once this view is adopted can we really be sure that the ground has been laid for dialogue and for hope for a better, violence-free world.

People from all over the world, with all kinds of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, work, learn and live together every day. That is the environment that makes tolerance important and brings about an appreciation of diversity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of those places at the crossroad between East and West, North and South. It is just like a small world. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are all found in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are almost a bridge between civilizations. It is here that Western rationality meets Eastern sentiment, ultimately making Bosnia and Herzegovina such a wonderful and vibrant community.

For centuries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people lived not only side by side with one another — Muslims, Jews, Christians — but lived as one with one another. Abundant proof of this coexistence can be found in every step you take in Bosnia and Herzegovina: in its culture, literature, architecture — everywhere. In our capital, Sarajevo, you can find within a 200 metres circle, a synagogue, a mosque and Catholic and Orthodox churches that have been standing next to each other since the fifteenth century, almost leaning on each other and supporting one another, without being inconvenienced by the other in any way.

Such a rich cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its diversity of cultures, religions and people, ultimately enriches our lives. Children grow up aware of differences, but they are taught tolerance and respect for their friends and neighbours — a lesson that has been passed down from generation to generation.

It is important to instil those same values in children around the world. They are the future, and teaching them tolerance, respect and appreciation for cultures and religions will prove as important as teaching them writing and the basics of mathematics. But teaching our children will mean nothing, if we do not lead by our example.

Many preach tolerance and respect, but it cannot simply end with preaching. To take the next step and practice what we preach is what needs to be done. Religious groups and religious leaders around the world have a very important duty when it comes to interreligious and intercultural cooperation. Interreligious dialogue as a dimension of intercultural communication will have reached its full potential when a priest in a church, an imam in a mosque and a rabbi in a synagogue talk to each other and work with each other, conveying a common message, a message of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding.

Religious communities have enormous potential to become a positive force for peace and tolerance by making it clear that an attack against one faith is an attack against all faiths. Such collaboration and dialogue based on mutual respect represents key instruments for improving relations and cooperation among peoples and countries.

Nowadays, more than ever, people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are fully aware that there will be no prosperous future without true reconciliation, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its experience and history, can fully contribute to a dialogue between cultures and religions. On the international level, Bosnia and Herzegovina is very proud of its Interreligious Council and its tremendous potential for the future. A magnificent venue for cooperation, collaboration and dialogue, this interreligious body, together with religious communities, can help us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has reached many of its goals. We are determined to reach all of them. We are dedicated to building a praiseworthy society with the highest of ethical norms based on dialogue, understanding and acceptance. We are armed with courage to face the differences and diversities of others. We cooperate interreligiously and interculturally, we cooperate for peace.

To share and discuss points of view on such matters is necessary and important, but unfortunately, not enough. Education, from the youngest age, is a prerequisite for a better life and future. Our ultimate challenge seems to be to educate a new generation capable of building a new spirit, one which accepts and respects diversity, capable of accepting rather than excluding, forgiving rather than hating.

We all know that it has always been easy to point out differences among ourselves. What we must do, however, is to focus on what we have in common and realize that we are bound by those commonalities. Then, when it comes to our differences, we can learn that they are not obstacles in our lives, but something to appreciate. We must not only respect our differences, but we must learn how to make use of them, how to learn from each other and how to appreciate that which differentiates us.

The time has come to move beyond just tolerance. Diversity is not something to be endured, but rather it is something that we, as a society, must actively engage ourselves in every day.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Agustin Komoe, Minister of Culture and la Francophonie of Côte d'Ivoire.

Mr. Komoe (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): It is an honour for me to address this Assembly to discuss understanding among religions and cultures, and cooperation for peace.

This subject is of great importance for my country, Côte d'Ivoire, which is a nation-State of West Africa on the Gulf of Guinea, covering 322,000 square kilometres. Côte d'Ivoire is an ethnic mosaic of more than 60 ethnicities, which can be classified into four main groups. With a population of 16 million, we host between 4 and 5 million foreigners — almost one third of the population, a case almost unique in the world.

Linguistically, our country offers diversity just as great, counting some 70 languages, even though the official language and the language used in schools is French.

Turning to religion, Côte d'Ivoire offers to the world a model of syncretism and peaceful interfaith coexistence. There is no majority religion in Côte d'Ivoire. More than one third of Ivorians are Muslims, 22 per cent are Christians and 17 per cent of our population has remained faithful to traditional or

non-revealed religions, which have had a considerable influence on the other beliefs. Lastly, 17 per cent of Ivorians have chosen other religious faiths.

So far, coexistence between these various religions has not led to any major conflict. Each citizen practices his faith while strictly observing freedom of worship and the secular nature of the State. Furthermore, the motto and the national anthem of Côte d'Ivoire emphasize the virtues of work, discipline, union and hospitality.

The same goes for our constitution, which emphatically stresses respect for freedoms and the need for a civic life underpinned by democracy. How can one not mention inter-ethnic alliances that are veritable social cement, serving as covenants between peoples and ethnic groups? When these alliances take place in a family setting, they are the subject of friendly banter. These agreements seal the social contract among the communities involved.

Therefore, the nation is rebuilding and is gradually reducing its difficult toll of divisions from the past. Our rich and diversified cultural heritage calls upon citizens to own their traditions and customs in order to better participate in the dialogue of cultures and in the affirmation of their Ivorian cultural exception.

The military and political crisis that we are gradually but resolutely emerging from has reaffirmed the importance of solidarity at the national, regional and global scales. The Economic Community of West African States, the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the United Nations have helped Ivorians throughout our social crisis, which could have become irreparable, contributing greatly to limiting the harmful effects of the crisis. The attitude of the United Nations in view of the Ouagadougou Accord, as well as the conclusive results, show the need to help in the resolution of conflicts while remaining attentive to the fundamental needs of the players.

The Ivorian crisis — the problems as well as the process of resolving them — is an obvious example of the consubstantial and incompressible nature of our cultural exception and of the dialogue of cultures in our quest for peace and sustainable development through multilateral cooperation. This is why Côte d'Ivoire is pleased that it ratified the conventions and protocols that should give the world the proper defences essential for making them long-term.

Côte d'Ivoire also wants all peoples to be convinced that the culture of human abilities is more than traditions. Because of their identifying and economic dimensions, cultural products express the creative vitality of peoples and contribute to democratic awareness and social cohesion. That is why those who use violence, sometimes in the name of religion, seriously betray that message. We need to get out of this spiral of distrust, intolerance and violence, and restore religions in their ethic dimensions. Furthermore, if people who are culturally or religiously different overcome their distrust and exchange it for mutual human values, they will discover the extent to which they share and live with common values.

Côte d'Ivoire is made up of distinct communities, each with its own exclusive cultural characteristics. Accordingly, a citizen's feeling of belonging and of cultural identity often depends on his degree of familiarity with the cultural characteristics of his own community and those of others.

Consequently, our Government's policy helps people become familiar with the characteristics of the society of which they are a part and, in doing so, strengthens their feeling of belonging and cultural identity. Accordingly the Ministry of Culture seeks, inter alia, to promote the creation, spread and preservation of culture and access to that creation throughout the national territory, and to think about the issues that the society should consider in order to get to know each other better.

This is how the manner of being, acting, speaking and thinking as Ivorians forms a whole, a relatively stable and open system that can preserve and impart itself from one generation to another, while improving on contributions from outside.

This approach mainstreams the plurality and mobility that characterize the elements that make up cultures. In addition to the necessary diversity of traditions and dialogue of cultures, the concept, the basic element, of culture is inherent in humanity. Languages differ, and with them the methods of symbolizing, conceptualizing and theorizing. Forms of labour and production also vary in time and space. Lastly, judicial, moral and political institutions vary as well.

That is why culture is not just an issue of ethnicity. It is a fundamental human fact, the combined play of symbolism and imagination. Culture is closely

connected with language and work, but it cannot really be reduced to just that. Religious life and political life, and sometimes both, play a very important role in human societies, but they assume forms that do not lend themselves to a single definition.

Accordingly, the variety of cultures is enormous. However, this cultural diversity does not mean that cultures are heterogeneous and without any connecting points or unifying factors. Unity may be the result of the persistence of a common identity — that of a nature, a condition or a shared code of conduct. They can also result from a history that is sometimes very checkered, progressive and adaptive. Cultures start out by being alien to each other, sometimes hostile. Each considers itself exclusive and superior, but gradually these cultures intermingle and start to question their own foundation.

The distribution on a scale of conflicts shows that tension is not merely between a common culture and future interpretations of it. The distribution of culture within a given society reflects a hierarchy of institutions and social status, and from that, wrenching situations of inequality and privation result. Culture involves mechanisms of inclusion, but also of exclusion. These are not just the result of spontaneous, uncontrollable social tendencies, but are also acts that have to do with conflict of ownership, both real and symbolic, and sometimes they have to do with strategies of controls.

Peace is inconceivable without the active participation of conscientious citizens. Peace is rooted in social justice, respect for human rights and the implementation of international law. That is why the emergence of civil society as a new stakeholder for peace opens up important prospects for resolving and even preventing conflicts.

As an example of the quest for hegemony, world military expenditures increased by 34 per cent between 1996 and 2005 and are now reckoned to be $1,118 trillion, at a time when a billion people are living in extreme poverty. Surely something can be done to develop, democratize and disarm.

Furthermore, the theme of the debate and the thinking at this meeting reflect existential problems. Relations between religions and cultures must help build peace between peoples; otherwise extremism and intolerance will impede sustainable development.

It is the mission of humankind to enshrine brotherhood and build bridges between religions and cultures to bring about true peace. Tolerance, solidarity and brotherly love proceed from a culture that respects religious and cultural foundations. Therefore, we could say, paraphrasing one of the pioneers of negritude, that Côte d'Ivoire is a hand that is wounded but open to the world and to people of goodwill, seeking fair trade and global solidarity.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Cheikh Tidiane Sy, Minister of Justice of Senegal.

Mr. Sy (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): I should like at the outset to warmly congratulate you, Mr. President, on the excellent initiative to hold the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, at a time when doubt seems to beset us and when conflict situations — particularly those arising out of lack of understanding and religious intolerance — are multiplying and becoming increasingly complex.

The holding of this debate is further proof of the international community's resolute commitment to working to strengthen dialogue among peoples, cultures and religions in order to frustrate the efforts of prophets of doom and deny the theories of those who believe in an inevitable clash of civilizations. In that regard, several national, regional and international initiatives have already been taken to lay the foundations for a fruitful dialogue among cultures and religions. That is reflected in the report of the Secretary-General (A/62/337), in which he reports on efforts being made by the principal institutions of the United Nations system working in this area. In that connection, I should like to welcome the relevant initiatives of UNESCO and the praiseworthy efforts of the Alliance of Civilizations. I can assure the Assembly that Senegal, as always, is engaged alongside all those who are working to bring people together, to overcome obstacles born of a lack of understanding and to fight intolerance.

Today more than ever before, the world is wracked by crises whose principal causes include, inter alia, religious differences, intolerance and the extremism of certain people having hidden agendas. In the name of supposed religious or cultural convictions, those people are committing terrible atrocities whose main victims are often innocent women and children. Such actions, fuelled and maintained by ignorance, run

counter to the principles and precepts of every religion and reflect contempt for and violation of the sanctity of human life. We must eradicate forever this phenomenon, which has increased so much over the past few years.

That is precisely why this encounter is so relevant: it should enable us to embark on paths of reflection aimed at overcoming any attempt to manipulate religious or cultural specificities for hidden purposes. I believe that the time has come to establish an open and unconditional dialogue that can enable us to remove obstacles, move beyond clichés and stereotypes and instil respect, acceptance and understanding among peoples.

The success of such a dialogue will depend greatly on our commitment to demonstrating our attachment to certain common universal values, such as justice and equity, and our determination to eliminate antagonism and discord. It will also have to be predicated on mutual respect and acceptance of others' differences, as an alternative to cultural contempt. Mutual respect is a sine qua non for any dialogue and indeed for any joint human endeavour, for, as former Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared, "We can love what we are, without hating what we are not" (*A/56/PV.42, p. 3*).

Those words of Kofi Annan are well understood in my country, Senegal, where the 95 per cent of the people who are Muslim and the 5 per cent who are Christian live in peaceful coexistence on the basis of shared values of tolerance and respect for others. This interfaith coexistence is so deeply rooted in Senegal that it is not rare to find Christians and Muslims in the same family as a result of mixed marriages, which have become a tangible sociological reality.

However, in order to consolidate and strengthen that achievement, which is a result of the open spirit of the Senegalese and their natural impulse to engage in dialogue, we constantly invite people to attend interfaith meetings to overcome prejudice and lack of understanding. For it is true that, despite our physical proximity, intolerance and extremism can separate us from one another. It is precisely to invigorate and share this valuable achievement that the President of the Republic of Senegal, Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, has called for the holding of a summit on Islamic-Christian dialogue — an appeal that I should like to solemnly reiterate here.

However, President Wade, in the printed text of the statement he made during last week's general debate at the present session of the General Assembly, recalled:

> "It is unacceptable that the feelings of more than a billion Muslims continue to be attacked by ill-intentioned individuals in the name of a supposedly limitless freedom of expression. All freedoms are limited by responsibility."

Freedom of expression, respect for human rights and democracy all require moral authority so that they can be not only consolidated and strengthened, but also, and above all, refined. Those principles remain fragile and require a framework to prevent both censorship and a drift away from them, which often has tragic consequences for innocent people. That is why all sectors of society in all countries of the world must be fully involved in this endeavour of dialogue so as to build a reliable and viable consensus.

As President Wade has said, the international community must, without delay, cooperate to find paths of peaceful coexistence for current and future generations. How can we make the world's political leaders, intellectuals and religious leaders shoulder their responsibility to put an end to extremists' use of religion? Indeed, it is important to say loudly and clearly that such extremism results from a misunderstanding of holy writ. This quest for peace and harmony among people is everyone's responsibility, but the media have a primary role: to help us gain better understanding and avoid the pitfall of facile criticism and caricature. To banish the demon of intolerance is to eliminate the sources of misunderstanding among peoples and to educate our young people to accept differences and respect others.

No culture is superior to another; no civilization can presume to teach lessons to others. Everyone has the right to dignity and respect for his or her religious convictions. That is the golden rule that must be the basis for dialogue among religions and cultures.

The President: I now call on His Excellency The Rev. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, Presidential Adviser on Foreign Affairs and former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nicaragua.

Mr. d'Escoto Brockmann (Nicaragua) (*spoke in Spanish*): May the all merciful God of love, peace, non-violence, unity, reconciliation and solidarity

enlighten our minds and open our hearts, so that all of us together as brothers and sisters, children of the same father will be able to take strong steps towards creating the culture of peace and non-violence that is so badly needed in the world.

Nicaragua celebrates the fact that the United Nations is discussing dialogue, understanding and cooperation among religions and cultures for peace. We would like to congratulate the Philippines and Pakistan for that important initiative.

Nicaragua strongly believes that there is nothing more urgent in the world than to set ourselves free from the terrible human addiction to violence, whether it is used to appropriate the belongings of others or in self-defence. It is absolutely clear that what is most needed in the world is a culture of peace to counteract the culture of war, death and destruction, or terrorism disguised under the name of low-intensity warfare, preventive warfare or any other such camouflage. Our Organization was created specifically to put an end to the cycle of war which, by the middle of the last century, had resulted in two world wars.

Respect for the principles of the Charter of our Organization was supposed to put an end at least to megawars. But if we look at the United Nations from the perspective of its effectiveness in avoiding war, we would have to conclude that it has not been effective at all. Among the mightiest of our own Members we find those who are the most powerfully addicted to warfare as a tool to advance their own interests.

The international political dialogue has not managed to stop wars. They seem to be increasing in number day by day and threaten to continue to multiply with the insane concept of preventive war whereby the potential aggressor resorts to his crystal ball to identify the next target of his aggression and occupation. Among the permanent members of the Security Council itself, you will find some who have tried to convert the Council into a clearing house to approve or license their war plans.

In the meantime, the great majority of our Members can only watch from the sidelines, because at the level of political dialogue it is considered politically incorrect to draw attention to or criticize the powerful even when the most egregious violations of the Charter are being committed.

We must therefore go beyond a purely political dialogue to meet each other at the deepest level of our shared humanity — in other words, on the terrain of our religions where we find the most deeply rooted beliefs concerning the value and meaning of human life. We are keenly aware that interfaith dialogue is not without arrogance and other flaws that often derail political dialogue. For that reason, Nicaragua would be inclined to promote cooperation among religions in the context of the creation of a culture of peace.

Ecumenical dialogue is very important, but we believe that through ecumenical cooperation we will be able to discover more rapidly that there are far more things that unite human beings than things that supposedly separate us. The supreme principle of unconditional love without exception or exclusion is undoubtedly the most important value that ties all religions together. It will be through a mutual discovery of our values, concrete cooperation and through the creation of a culture of peace and non-violence that we will be better able to advance towards greater understanding between religions and the cultures they influence.

It is through our religious faith and the teachings of our religions that most of us find universal fraternity. We are all brothers and sisters because we are all children of the same father. In other words, because God is everyone's father, so we are all brothers and sisters created to live in peace and harmony as stewards of creation. But creation does not belong to us, for God is the only Lord and master of life and of everything that exists in creation.

Nothing could be more contrary to the will of our common father and creator than the reliance on warfare that has become the greatest scourge in the world. All who have reached that conclusion by the path of culture, religion or ethics have a duty to speak out in favour of a culture of peace and non-violence. It is also incumbent upon us to rid ourselves once and for all of the thought that denouncing the reliance on war practised by the powerful is politically incorrect. On the contrary, not to denounce that concept as forcefully as it deserves to be denounced would be suicidal and unacceptable from an ethical and religious point of view.

It is through love of God and our neighbours that we will find the strength to unfailingly struggle for a culture of peace and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi is

a prime example for us all. On one occasion, noting that Gandhi had a picture of Jesus on his wall, Louis Fischer, his famous biographer, asked him why he had a picture of Jesus on his wall when he was not Christian. And Gandhi replied that he was, of course, Christian and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and Jewish. God is the same god and, through our different religions, teaches us that love and peace must be the essential qualities in the lives of the children of God — in other words, all the men and women on Earth.

The President: I now give the floor to His Eminence Metropolitan Valentin of Orenburg, Leader of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Russian Federation.

Metropolitan Valentin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Cooperation among religions and cultures is becoming tremendously important in today's world, which is confronting exacerbated inter-ethnic political and social contradictions, attempts to use religion to justify terrorism and extremism, and the failure of the secular system of social relations to properly address certain challenges that relate to spiritual matters.

More and more people today are concluding that attempts to deny religion the right to be heard in the public forum — to make it the business of private life alone — that these attempts are futile and constitute encroachment on human freedom. The main problem of societies that are losing the concept of religion is that they are too fragmented. Clearly, the cult of consumerism and rampant egoism make them unstable and divided. Without the spiritual, vertical dimension of life, people's lives will not be made happier by money, things, entertainment or technology. Without allegiance to the eternal moral principles, individuals cannot maintain or make an ideal either of the law or of freedom. I am convinced that it is precisely traditional morality that can be the solid foundation of the peaceful coexistence of peoples of various cultures and religions.

One of the factors leading to the growth of extremism is religious illiteracy among many of our contemporaries. That is why it is so essential to educate young generations in the spirit of traditional religions. Recently, this idea was supported by the President of the Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir Putin. I believe that everywhere where people so desire they must have the right to receive in-depth knowledge in a regular public school about their religious tradition, and also basic knowledge about the views and convictions of those living side by side with them.

The Russian model of interreligious relations has long been built on respect for the faith and the way of life and customs of traditional communities, and for the principles of establishing a family and a social entity among them. The inhabitants of our country have different faiths; but we have always recognized the right of us all to live and act according to our principles, both in private life and in public life. It is precisely that which has created the conditions for civil peace and strengthened stability. As a result, Russia has never had religious wars. Today, communities of the traditional religions of Russia, namely Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, continue their centuries-old interreligious dialogue.

The Interreligious Council of Russia, which was established in 1998, acts on the basis of the inviolability of religious teachings and of moral rules, which, to a large extent, are the same across religions. We were convinced that our model of dialogue was the right one at the World Summit of Religious Leaders held in Moscow in July 2006. Authoritative religious leaders from 49 countries supported our concept regarding the link between human freedom and moral responsibility.

The universal nature of the United Nations makes it crucial to take into account the spiritual traditions and diversity of world cultures and religions. In recent years, attention to this factor has been reflected in various initiatives within the context of this world Organization. These include the Alliance of Civilizations, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, the Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, as well as other initiatives. Each of these initiatives is important and valuable. The World Summit of Religious Leaders unanimously supported a more systematic dialogue between the religious community and the United Nations.

Accordingly, I would imagine that it would make sense now to develop the outcomes of the Summit discussions and think about creating, under United Nations aegis, a special forum, a kind of consultative council of religions, for the exchange of views among representatives of the main world faiths. We hope that the activities of this council could help not just to

strengthen the foundations of interreligious peace, but also to enrich the process of the elaboration and adoption of decisions by the world community. This idea could become the subject of a thorough discussion at this and at future sessions of the General Assembly. And I am pleased that the High-level Dialogue provides a good opportunity to discuss such an important question.

I am grateful to the President of the General Assembly and to the countries that sponsored resolution A/61/269 and to the organizers of today's forum for implementing the initiative of the Dialogue that, for the first time, is taking place within the walls of this world Organization.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Hidayat Orujov, Head of the State Committee on Relations with Religious Organizations of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Orujov (Azerbaijan) (*spoke in Russian*): First of all, I should like to discharge the honourable duty entrusted to me by transmitting to this General Assembly the sincere greetings, as well as good wishes, of the people of Azerbaijan and the personal wishes of our head of State, President Ilham Aliyev. I express the hope that this meeting will be an important contribution in expanding cooperation among religious communities and cultures, conducive to global peace and security.

This stage of globalization brings peoples and populations closer together but exposes even more the characteristics that draw sustenance from a unique kind of mentality and expression of faith. Today, we are living at a time of heightened religious awareness, which sometimes takes on exaggerated forms. And sometimes it is maliciously exploited to fuel conflicts on religious grounds. For that reason, it is so crucial for tolerance to be established and to prevail.

I must say with a feeling of pride that tolerance, established by the civilized world as one of the main democratic values, is a characteristic of our people that has evolved over centuries and could serve as an example for others.

Historically speaking, Azerbaijan was a meeting place for various faiths and civilizations. Today, it is successfully carrying out that function. Together with Islam, other faiths have historically existed in Azerbaijan — Christianity and Judaism, among others. Basically, since time immemorial, Azerbaijan became a second homeland for people suffering from religious discrimination. People congregated in Azerbaijan with hope, not only the persecuted adherents of various religions, but adherents of various interpretations of Islam, too. Perhaps that is precisely why the population of Azerbaijan is so varied in ethnic and religious terms.

Fortunately, in Azerbaijan, where various faiths and religious trends were propagated throughout our history, relations of tolerance were established and prevailed between various communities. And we had no noted instances of xenophobia on ethnic, racial or religious grounds. Various groups that put down roots in the territory of Azerbaijan did not feel that they were outsiders and made themselves at home.

For example, the history of the emergence of Jews in Azerbaijan goes back a long, long way — 2,500 years — and during this enormous period of history, there is no evidence of any discrimination against them by the Azerbaijan people.

Christianity in Azerbaijan historically was one of the leading religions, and today our people views its past as being connected with that faith, as being a component of its glorious history. I am pleased that Azerbaijan is one of the few countries where mosque, church and synagogue coexist side by side, in peace, and where there are no instances of any discord between people of different religious faiths.

We note, however, with some bitterness the fact that Azerbaijani territory is still being occupied by Armenia, which is abusing the traditional tolerance of our people in carrying out at the State level a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. During the last century, more than one million Azerbaijanis lived in Armenia; today, not a single representative of our people remains there. The same fate hit Azerbaijanis living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, too. And regions contiguous with it are now occupied by the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia.

The General Assembly must agree that it is therefore hard to believe the statement about tolerance that we heard coming from the mouth of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Armenia today in this very Hall. Among the casualties of this aggression are our historical and religious monuments; the shrines of other faiths have also fallen victim. And this is before the eyes of the entire world. In our lands that have been occupied, they have razed our religious monuments to

the ground. Many times we have turned to this Organization and to the world community demanding that the four Security Council resolutions on the problem be implemented calling for the unconditional liberation of the lands occupied by Armenia.

More than a million citizens of Azerbaijan have been condemned to be refugees and have been forcibly displaced; and they must be returned to their ancestral homes. Yet, the occupier, Armenia, still does not want to give up its territorial appetites.

I appeal to you and through you, participants in this forum, to all countries and international organizations, and I call for your cooperation, in the name of restoring the trampled rights of a million of my compatriots rendered hapless by the occupiers. I call upon you to heed the voice of Azerbaijan, which for centuries has revered the lofty tenets of good-neighbourliness, love of humankind and tolerance inherent in all of the great religions.

I hope that the Azerbaijan people and my country will receive due, well-deserved consideration in this respect and that our experience will help and benefit other peoples and States.

The President: I give the floor to Senator Rod Kemp of Australia.

Mr. Kemp (Australia): The right to freedom of religion or belief is a basic right and an essential element of any harmonious society. It is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Unfortunately, in many areas of the world, many people do not enjoy these freedoms: they cannot worship freely; they suffer from discrimination. Religious intolerance and extremism continue to threaten global security, peace and stability. The importance of defending religious freedom, cannot, therefore be overstated.

To build and maintain free societies, we have to recognize that different ideas and beliefs can and should be allowed to coexist and flourish, because tolerance and respect for pluralism are essential values for an open society.

Australia is a culturally and linguistically diverse society, with about 300 languages spoken and a wide variety of religions practised. The Australian Government promotes acceptance and respect among Australians of all cultural and religious backgrounds.

In this context, Australia has implemented the "Living in Harmony" programme for several years, bringing Australians from different backgrounds together to forge a sense of belonging, mutual respect and understanding. More than 50 projects to promote interfaith dialogue have been funded under this programme.

In 2006, Australia embarked on a national action plan to build on social cohesion, harmony and security, to which the Australian Government has committed A$ 35 million over four years. Measures under the plan include the creation of a centre of research in Islamic studies, the promotion of interfaith understanding through interschool cooperation, employment and inter-community engagement projects, crisis management training and specialist education materials.

Australia strongly supports freedom of religion and belief and is determined to promote understanding and foster harmony between faith communities across our region. Our regional efforts aim to bridge cultural and religious differences and counter the spread of extremism.

Australia has fostered interfaith cooperation through our involvement in the Regional Interfaith Dialogue, a process which we co-sponsor with Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The inaugural Regional Interfaith Dialogue took place in Yogyakarta in 2004 and was co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia. New Zealand hosted the third Regional Interfaith Dialogue in Waitangi in May 2007. Participants in those dialogues are drawn from the major faith groups of the region, the 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, East Timor, Fiji, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. The 2007 Dialogue resulted in agreement on the Waitangi Declaration and Plan of Action. The Plan of Action outlined recommendations by representatives for future regional engagement on interfaith issues, particularly in the areas of partnership-building, education and media.

Interfaith dialogues are an important forum within which to promote peace, tolerance and understanding by working with faith and civil society groups in our region and beyond. Although Governments can play an important role in facilitating

dialogue, the responsibility for promoting tolerance and understanding between and within communities must rest with the communities themselves, particularly their leaders. Faith and community leaders have a critical role to play in denying extremists any religious or moral legitimacy and in building trust between communities.

Separately, Australia and the European Union will co-host a youth interfaith forum in Australia in December 2007. The event will focus on promoting understanding and encouraging personal links between young leaders of religious communities in South-East Asia, Australia and Europe. In support of interfaith dialogue processes, Australia is also hosting the Parliament of the World's Religions in 2009 — the world's largest multi-faith event, which is usually held every five years in different cities around the world.

Australia will continue to engage constructively on this issue with the Human Rights Council by encouraging the global promotion of religious tolerance in that important forum. The Council needs to play an active role in ensuring the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by monitoring international adherence to the provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Australia welcomes the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative to support projects that promote cross-cultural and religious understanding. Australia believes that its practical initiatives complement the interfaith activities taking place in our region.

We, the international community, should continue to forge interfaith and international partnerships that aim to ensure that the right to freedom of religion is respected in all countries.

The President: I call on His Excellency Mr. João Gomes Cravinho, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, who will speak on behalf of the European Union.

Mr. Gomes Cravinho (Portugal): In Portugal's role as European Union (EU) presidency, I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. We welcome this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, including the interactive hearing with representatives of civil society to take place this afternoon. We believe that Europe has a key role to play in the promotion of interreligious and intercultural understanding, along with other regions of the world.

In the history of international relations, the challenge for so long has been the peaceful coexistence of different value systems. Over the centuries, many different ways to avoid conflict have been sought. One solution is for nations to share peace and prosperity through dialogue, understanding and tolerance.

Mutual understanding does not entail imposing one's values, culture or faith on others. It involves respecting different values and beliefs based on an awareness of the common political, economic, social, ecological and cultural challenges that we face in an increasingly global and vulnerable world. It means protecting and promoting all human rights and fundamental freedoms that have been repeatedly reaffirmed as universal; it entails freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief; and it requires an open mind and the willingness to understand the pluralism of cultures, religions and beliefs.

Beyond those attitudes and intercultural competences, we must focus on concrete cooperation and common actions. Pluralism in European society and the legal, political and social conditions for coping with it have been major factors for prosperity and development. We must enhance mutual understanding on the basis of our firm conviction that human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression, are the common ground on which we stand.

Dialogue will succeed only if we make sure that both men and women's experiences and expertise are integrated effectively into our intercultural and interreligious dialogue and into social and political initiatives of conflict prevention at all levels. Dialogue will bear fruit only if we enable our youth to respond actively and positively to the challenges of our pluralistic and vulnerable world.

The European Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. Those principles are common to all member States and the EU is ready to play its part in the process. A common understanding and acceptance of core values among Europeans of all social, cultural and religious

backgrounds is crucial for peaceful cohabitation and social cohesion. In consequence, the EU applies its core values and principles in all of its policies and promotes them within Europe and beyond.

The European Union's integration and non-discrimination policies are guided by the following principles: the principle of equality before the law; the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of any ground and the fight against racism; respect for cultural, linguistic and religious diversity; and equality between men and women.

The EU promotes freedom of religion and belief throughout European societies and beyond, including through the media. The resolution introduced to the Assembly by the EU on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief, which was adopted last year by consensus, is but one example of our commitment to guarantee that fundamental freedom.

European culture has been enriched by outside influences throughout its history, and European culture and ideas have had a profound influence on many cultures throughout the world. Europeans of various social, cultural and religious backgrounds contribute to the diversity and prosperity of Europe today. Today's European identity is a multiple one; it reflects manifold and pluralist influences, including those of migration and globalization. Europe faces the challenges of continuously developing and strengthening the dialogue with its various communities, ethnic minorities and numerous religious communities, including the very positive engagement with Muslims of and in Europe. The European Union views its political and legal framework as essential to ensuring social peace and cohesion and to marginalizing radicalism and extremism on all sides. Freedom of religion, non-discrimination and recognition of religious communities in particular are crucial preconditions for any successful dialogue.

The importance of intercivilizational understanding is strongly reflected in European Union policy and action. The EU is active in promoting intercultural and interreligious understanding, both within Europe and with international partners. I would like to give some examples of initiatives strongly supported by the European Union that aim at promoting a more peaceful and cohesive society.

The Euromed Barcelona process provides a framework for dialogue between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners. It established the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures. The Foundation's main objective is to bring people and organizations from both shores of the Mediterranean closer to each other and to help bridge the gap between them. Particular importance is given to the development of human resources, while youth is the main target group. Another priority is the promotion of tolerance among people by furthering exchanges between members of diverse civil societies. The Foundation, which facilitates the coordination of 35 national networks, has programmes in the fields of media, education, women and youth.

With a membership of 43 Asian and European States, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is uniquely placed to foster links between Asia and Europe through interfaith and intercultural dialogue. ASEM Interfaith Dialogues have helped to build mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans in the fields of interfaith and interreligious relations. The third ASEM Interfaith Dialogue was held in Nanjing, China, in June this year. Together with the two previous meetings — in Bali, Indonesia in 2005, and in Larnaca, Cyprus, in 2006 — they addressed the relations of interfaith dialogue to peace, justice, compassion and tolerance. The Nanjing Statement issued at the end of the Dialogue reflected the role of interfaith dialogue in globalization, peace, social cohesion and development, and cultural and educational cooperation. A fourth Dialogue is scheduled for 2008 in Amsterdam.

Additionally, the ASEM partnership has achieved substantial results in boosting cultural, educational, intellectual and people-to-people exchanges, expanding and facilitating research, networking and promoting cultural diversity.

Europe is a strong supporter of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. It was proposed by the President of the Spanish Government in 2005 and co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime Minister. In April 2007, the Secretary-General appointed Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. The Alliance, with the endorsement of the Secretary-General, intends to galvanize collective action across diverse societies in order to combat extremism, overcome cultural and social barriers between mainly the Western and predominantly Muslim worlds, and

reduce tensions and polarization between societies that differ in religious and cultural values.

It is our understanding that, in order to most effectively move forward the agenda of dialogue and tolerance, the Alliance of Civilizations and other United Nations initiatives for enhancing dialogue and mutual understanding should be carried out in a coordinated, coherent, and complementary manner within the existing institutional framework. The EU sees the Alliance of Civilizations as a flagship initiative in that area, and we would see it as a potential focal point for the increasing number of initiatives. Through a better coordination of initiatives, rather than their proliferation, we improve our chances of making a difference.

Turning again to Europe, the Council of Europe white paper on intercultural dialogue is expected to be adopted in November 2007. On its website devoted entirely to the role of intercultural dialogue, the Council states its firm belief that

> "[d]ialogue between cultures, the oldest and most fundamental mode of democratic conversation, is an antidote to rejection and violence. Its objective is to enable us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging".

Finally, in October 2005, the European Commission proposed that 2008 be declared the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. With a budget of €10 million, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue will present a wide variety of enriching concrete projects that will be implemented in the framework of EU programmes and other Community actions. The Year of Intercultural Dialogue will encourage the mobilization of civil society and actors at the European, national and local levels. Culture, education, youth, sport and citizenship will be the focus of activities.

To conclude, it is possible that the term "intercivilizational or intercultural dialogue" might be construed as an endorsement of the idea that humanity is divided by monolithic and entirely distinguishable civilizations, but that is far from accurate. In reality, the boundary lines between cultures are mostly unclear. Over time and space, different cultures influence each other profoundly. Most civilizations harbour people of different cultures who coexist peacefully. The European Union is committed to promoting dialogue and understanding, and to striving for universal appreciation of different religions, cultures and beliefs.

The President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Karen Hughes, Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs of the Department of State of the United States of America.

Ms. Hughes (United States of America): I am honoured to be here. I thank the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Srgjan Kerim, for convening this dialogue on religious and cultural understanding, and the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan and the Philippines for proposing it.

A noble framework — the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which President Bush cited here last week — guides our work. It recognizes that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" and the right to manifest those beliefs in "teaching, practice, worship and observance" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18*). This historic Declaration states that the right of religious freedom is both universal and human, applying to all people in all places.

Unfortunately, in too many places today, people are still persecuted for their beliefs or denied the right to worship. Yet our Universal Declaration and my own country's guarantee of freedom of religion challenge all of us to live up to our own high principles — to allow people to practice faith freely, to respect different beliefs, to seek to understand even when we do not agree, and to speak out against those who, through words or actions, trample religious tolerance.

My job of public diplomacy is to reach out to the rest of the world and other peoples in a spirit of friendship and to respect and listen to the concerns and interests of others, and President Bush asked me to make encouraging interfaith dialogue part of my work. Faith is foundational in many people's lives, and world leaders would not be wise to ignore its power or to cede its discussion to extremists.

As I travel the world, it is often my privilege to meet people whose faith has called them to do great good. I have met Muslim American doctors who travelled to Pakistan to help care for victims of the earthquake there; Catholic nuns who helped families left homeless by mudslides in Central America; and volunteers from many nations whose good hearts led them to help fight AIDS and malaria in Africa and

build schools in Afghanistan. I know first-hand that there are people of good will in all faiths and cultures.

My country is known for the separation of church and State, meaning that the United States Government can neither impose religion nor restrict its practice. Yet I worry that people in other parts of the world sometimes mistake freedom of religion to mean freedom from religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. In America, people of many different faiths and those of no faith live side by side and try to respect each other's views. We are not perfect, and religion is sometimes a source of division, as is race, but respect for each other's diversity is our goal, and in the aftermath of 11 September, many Christian, Jewish and Muslim Americans reached out to try to better understand each other.

I have found that people of all faiths have much in common. As a Christian, my highest commandments are to love God and love my neighbour. My Muslim and Jewish friends tell me the same is true for them. While there are theological differences, ultimately I believe that the vast majority of people of every faith and culture want similar things for themselves and their families — education and health care, a safe neighbourhood, a good job — and most people want our lives to make a difference and to leave our world a little better. These are not dreams owned by any one nation or people, but shared human dreams. Despite differences of language or culture or skin colour, so much more unites us as human beings than divides us.

Yet, we live in a world where misunderstanding and mistrust are being inflamed by rhetoric of hate and acts of terror. And, as leaders from Malaysia and the Palestinian territories said in their addresses before the General Assembly this year, we must not leave the debate only to those who seek to pervert religion by using violence to pursue political agendas.

As I travel the world representing my country and listening to people of other countries, I find two major misperceptions. First, in many Muslim-majority nations, people worry that the war against terror is directed at them. I want to assure our friends across the world that this is not the case. Most Americans recognize that terrorists do not represent mainstream thinking and do not represent, but, instead, pervert all faiths with their barbaric acts. Many of America's own citizens have roots in the Arab world. Others come from virtually every culture and faith tradition. Islam is part of the West and part of America, and several million American Muslims live, work and worship freely in our country.

The second major misperception comes from my fellow Americans. I hear the complaint that Muslims do not speak out against terrorist violence. Yet that is not the case either. Many constructive voices speak out strongly. Afghanistan's President Karzai has condemned suicide bombing as contrary to Islam and says that terrorists cheat children by recruiting them. The Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference speaks out strongly against terrorist acts. Iraqi and Algerian citizens have denounced terrorists as murderers. Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a leader of the Sahwa reform movement, sent an open letter condemning Osama bin Laden for murdering innocents, saying, "This religion that protects the sanctity of blood, even that of the birds and animals, can never approve the killing of innocents whatever the reasons or motives might be". As the Sheikh's letter suggests, the time has come when good people of all faiths must join together to state clearly that killing oneself in order to kill others is wrong and a matter of shame, never honour.

There are many legitimate grievances in our world, but none can ever justify the targeting and murder of innocents. This has no place in a civilized world. We all have a role, and America wants to be a partner in encouraging dialogue. Through websites and communications alerts, we are working to highlight the many voices speaking out against terrorist violence and for greater interfaith understanding. We are encouraging interfaith dialogue and conversations between cultures.

Through a new programme called Citizen Dialogue, we have sent Muslim-American citizens across the world to engage with grass-roots citizens in Muslim communities. We brought international religious clerics here and sent American clerics abroad. We have sponsored summer programmes for young people, teaching respect for diversity. We have sent out musicians to promote tolerance and to show that differences can enrich rather than divide us.

We are dramatically expanding our two-way education and exchange programmes, bringing international visitors here and sending Americans abroad. I believe that there is no better way to build respect and understanding than to visit, study and work

in each other's countries. We have increased participation in these vital programmes from 27,000 people just a few years ago to more than 40,000 today, and we are hoping to increase it further, to more than 50,000.

We are also encouraging more Americans to travel and study overseas to experience the world's rich cultural and religious contributions, to learn more about other nations of the world. We have started a new language initiative, encouraging America's young people to study Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and other important world languages.

Today's gathering is a reminder that we are all part of an increasingly interconnected world that calls on each of us — no matter what our culture or faith community — to work for peace, life and hope. Each faith and culture has the responsibility of confirming to all that it respects other faiths and cultures. As we listen to and learn from one another, we are building a safer and more respectful world for the next generation.

This year, the world is celebrating the 800th anniversary of the birth of Rumi, the great Sufi poet, who wrote, "When someone asks what there is to do, light the candle in their hand". Through dialogue, we are lighting candles, and I hope this light will shine across the world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Viktar Gaisenak, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belarus.

Mr. Gaisenak (Belarus) (*spoke in Russian*): Religious intolerance, xenophobia and opposition of one culture to another today pose a real threat to peace and stability in our world. Accordingly, engaging in a dialogue among cultures and religions, based on mutual understanding, equality, mutual respect and tolerance, is a major challenge of our day.

The Republic of Belarus has repeatedly proclaimed its commitment to intensifying this kind of dialogue for peace. Proof of this is the initiative put forward by President Lukashenka at the 2005 World Summit (see A/60/PV.5) to recognize diversity of ways to progress in the development of States as a value of human civilization.

Respect for the *sui generis* nature of States and the right of peoples to follow their own path based on international dialogue is an essential condition for the maintenance of international peace and security. Dialogue among cultures and religions has to take place at all levels — national, regional and global. The Republic of Belarus and its Government are making the necessary effort to support this kind of dialogue at the national level. Our country is a multi-ethnic and multireligious State. Belarus has more than 140 ethnic groups, and more than 3,000 organizations reflecting 25 faiths and religious beliefs operate in Belarus.

The concern of the State to ensure the right of our citizens to enjoy the freedom of conscience and religion, as enshrined in the legislation of our Republic, is implemented in everyday life. The Government's programme for the development of cooperation with religions has been adopted and is being successfully carried out, as is cooperation with ethnic groups and our compatriots living abroad.

Belarus is taking concrete steps at the international level as well, including within the United Nations in order to support religious and cultural understanding. Our country was one of the first to accede to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The Republic of Belarus has traditionally been a sponsor of all draft resolutions adopted by the General Assembly that seek to encourage dialogue among civilizations and cultures.

In June 2007, our country participated in the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. The purpose of our participation in these initiatives is to support real steps to expanding interreligious and intercultural understanding and dialogue for peace.

Accordingly, we welcome the establishment in the Secretariat of a focal point for questions of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation. In addition, we believe it would be desirable to make better use of the information and communication technology mechanisms within the Secretariat, including United Nations Radio, as well as the resources of the specialized agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system, to promote the development of interfaith understanding and cooperation. We also welcome the productive steps taken towards the implementation of international initiatives within the United Nations to mutually enrich cultures and to make progress towards implementing

the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, in particular the appointment of the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

In the context of the item that we are now discussing, a truly remarkable international event took place in September this year: the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Countries held in Tehran. For the first time ever, the topic of cultural diversity and human rights was discussed within the context of the Non-Aligned Movement. That is a natural outcome of the development of the Movement, which does not endorse confrontation and defends every country's right to choose its own path of progressive development for the benefit of its population, without fear of the powerful of this world. The Movement is focusing on intercultural dialogue and cooperation because it is a key to achieving sustainable development and mutual understanding at all levels.

We believe that the Tehran Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity, which was adopted as the outcome of that meeting, and the decision to establish a Non-Aligned Movement Centre for Human Rights and Cultural Diversity are of great importance not only for the Movement but also for the international community as a whole. The Declaration, inter alia, calls upon the international community to maximize the benefits of globalization and cooperation to promote understanding and respect for cultural diversity. It emphasizes that it is only through broad and sustained efforts that we can create a shared future based on our common humanity and all its diversity. It indicates priority areas for such efforts, in particular education, the mass media, cultural and academic activities and cooperation within the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as activities by non-governmental organizations. The Movement's Ministers for Foreign Affairs also agreed that issues related to respect for human rights and cultural diversity must be taken into account in programmes in the main areas of the Movement's activities.

I assure the General Assembly that the Republic of Belarus will continue to participate actively in coordinated international efforts to achieve full mutual understanding among cultures and religions, in the service of peace and progress in our world.

The President: I now call on Her Excellency Ms. Helena Bambasova, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

Ms. Bambasova (Czech Republic): The Czech Republic aligns itself with the statement made earlier by the representative of Portugal on behalf of the European Union.

Over the centuries, the inhabitants of the territory of the Czech Republic, a country at the very centre of Europe, have witnessed the disastrous consequences of many periods of religious intolerance and of the failure to respect cultural diversity and diversity of opinion. Many people had to go into exile to preserve their beliefs and ideas, and we take pride in the fact that many of them took their ideals of peaceful cooperation and cultural tolerance along with them. Among others, Jan Amos Comenius and many of his Moravian brothers had to leave their country in search of more tolerant places.

When the Czechoslovak State first saw the light of day, in 1918, wide-reaching religious freedom, and freedom of faith and conscience were constitutionally guaranteed. That paved the way for interreligious dialogue and for an equal partnership between religion and a democratic State based on civil society. After the fall of communism, our society once again opened up to the outside world, and we began to learn new lessons about accepting cultural and religious differences as a value rather than a threat.

Nearly 60 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights became an inspiration for all societies. Following the tragic events of the Second World War, and with the painful memory of suffering still vivid, nations demonstrated a strong commitment not to allow a repetition of such tragedies. The spirit and the text of the Declaration — which is neither long nor complicated — reflect the best ingredients for peace: tolerance, respect for diversity and the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Indeed, today, 60 years later, there is no better solution: using these three avenues is the best way to reduce tension, to explain misunderstandings and to come to the realization that the values of humanity unite us in all our differences, which enrich our shared existence.

If we are to be tolerant in our words and deeds and to appreciate the differences of others, we have to know ourselves, and we have to understand our differences. For that, we need dialogue. Where there is

no genuine and open dialogue across religious and cultural lines, there is space for prejudice. Only dialogue facilitates mutual understanding, which prevents violence and plays an important role in the maintenance of peace and the prevention of conflict. As the UNESCO Constitution states, "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

In order to lead a genuine dialogue, one must come to it with an open mind and listen to others. To create the conditions for a free, spontaneous and fruitful dialogue that reflects the variety of opinions in a society, we must ensure freedom of expression, pluralism and free participation by civil society and the public.

We need to learn about all cultures and religions. Indeed, we need to learn the art of leading a dialogue. Education for tolerance must not be limited to school education. In our efforts, we should include all of society, not only young people, although their role in crossing traditional borders and in being willing to accept the value of differences cannot be underestimated. We must further include journalists, teachers and all members of the public.

In supporting dialogue, cooperation, tolerance and education, the United Nations has played and must continue to play a crucial and instrumental role. Tolerance is one of the key principles on which the United Nations was founded in its struggle for a peaceful future. The closer we come together in our globalized world, the more important our understanding and our capacity for intercultural and interreligious dialogue will become.

For that reason, we were pleased to participate in the informal thematic debate on "Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities", held during the sixty-first session of the General Assembly. We would like to commend the President of the Assembly at its sixty-first session, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa, for organizing that event, which was in the right direction, as it encouraged genuine dialogue.

We would like to pay special tribute to the work of the Alliance of Civilizations and to take this opportunity to express our full support for Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, and for his efforts. We also fully support the activities of UNESCO. We participate actively in those and other valuable projects and programmes. We welcome opportunities to learn more about others, and we are prepared to support genuine dialogue in all bodies of the United Nations.

Once we have succeeded in learning how to lead an open, friendly and genuine dialogue among our cultures and religions and to promote the principles of tolerance, non-discrimination, respect and protection of the human rights of every individual in our societies, we will be on the way to achieving the goals enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

In conclusion, let me assure the Assembly that the Czech Republic is prepared to contribute actively to the achievement of our common goal of promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Lyubomir Kyuchukov, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria.

Mr. Kyuchukov (Bulgaria). On behalf of the Bulgarian Government, I commend the convening of today's High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I will try to be very concrete, practical and pragmatic.

Bulgaria's historical experience is one of tolerance among its citizens, irrespective of their religious denomination and cultural heritage. My country is at the crossroads between Christianity and Islam. Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, Roma, Armenians and other ethnic groups form the modern Bulgarian nation and are proud that ethnic and religious tolerance has always prevailed and that Bulgaria was one of the two European States where, even in the most turbulent historical moments — such as the Second World War — Jews were saved from deportation by their fellow countrymen.

In recent times, Bulgaria has embodied the model of transition that is characterized by preserving ethnic and religious peace. Everyone can understand what that means when we look at the map of South-East Europe and the western Balkans in post-Yugoslavia times. That is not to say that we feel immune, yet tolerance remains predominant at the societal level — a genuine characteristic of the national mentality.

That is why we supported and will consistently continue to support the Alliance of Civilizations. I take this opportunity to extend congratulations to the High

Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, President Jorge Sampaio, and to wish him success, in which we all have a stake and to which we can all contribute. As a member of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends, Bulgaria is currently developing its national action plan.

The success of the noble endeavour of intercultural dialogue depends to a great extent on the interaction between the United Nations and relevant regional organizations. The European Union, in partnership with the United Nations and on its own, is a factor for the promotion of interfaith and intercultural understanding. Bulgaria strongly supports the ongoing initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation, such as the Euromed Barcelona process, with its Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, the Black Sea Synergy, and the European Union Strategy on Central Asia. Bulgaria joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Forum and intends to participate in the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue.

We also welcome the declaration of 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, meant, inter alia, to bring about a better integration of minority groups and faith-based communities, in particular Muslim communities in non-Muslim environments. I should like to refer to a specific example.

Like elsewhere in Europe, in Bulgaria the Government and civil society attribute great importance to the integration of the Roma population. Ample proof of such joint action was the Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative. Conceived by the United Nations Development Programme, it was supported by nine Governments from Central and South-East Europe. It marked the first attempt on an international scale at joint action aimed at improving the lives of the Roma in Europe. The Decade was officially announced in 2005 in Sofia. In the course of the Bulgarian presidency of the Decade, the first monitoring report was prepared by Roma civil society organizations and released in Sofia in June this year.

The region of South-East Europe represents a crossroads of cultural and religious diversity. The Bulgarian chairmanship-in-office of the South-East European Cooperation Process is an opportunity for us to contribute in an even more active manner to the consolidation of stability, because intercultural, interethnic and interfaith dialogue in our region means nothing less than peace, stability and security.

Guided by such an approach, we launched and helped to materialize concrete steps to enhance direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina at the level of ministers of culture, leading to the restoration and preservation of cultural and religious monuments in Kosovo. In 2003, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov, launched the idea of a joint project on cultural corridors in South-East Europe, intended to promote, together with UNESCO, the centuries-old connections between the peoples of the region that today form the basis for better regional cooperation and development. Several regional forums traced a road map to a new kind of attitude and interpretation of the rich cultural heritage of the region.

We therefore firmly support international efforts, including the unique role of the United Nations, to promote development, peace and security through international cooperation and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Today's forum could make a difference if it helps us get closer to a consensus in that respect.

The meeting rose at 1.20 p.m.